

The Perils of Peter the Pelican

Article by Roberto Gaitan, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

After a long day of field trips with our Class of 2023 Trainees, I received an email from Ethel Cantu (Class of 2017). She had been contacted by a friend, Ruth, who lived on Town Resaca in Brownsville and was trying to find help for an injured American White Pelican, aka, Peter, but had not been successful.

On behalf of Ruth, Ethel was wondering if I might know someone that could help Peter. As her friend asked Ethel, did we “know anyone in the birdwatcher world who could rescue a sick or injured white pelican in our resaca and take it to the zoo?”

Peter had been sitting on top of a dredging conveyance link for two days. He had not been seen fishing and apparently could not fly. It would occasionally stand and preen but that was it.



Peter on dredging pipe in the resaca—photo by Ruth Anne

Ruth had contacted the zoo that was willing to care for injured animals, but they couldn't go get it. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department person passed Ruth to the game warden. She also talked to Dr. Hines who wanted to help, but didn't have space for another bird and also didn't go out to get injured birds. The Public Utilities Board helped educate Ruth on the operation of the dredging equipment, but they didn't have boats or training to get Peter and neither did Animal Control.

So then, Who You Gonna Call?...Texas Master Naturalist! (I know. Doesn't quite have the same ring to it; too many syllables.)

Ethel is fortunate to know Barbara and I to ask for help. We are fortunate to know some caring people in the birdwatcher world. As I told them, I have a canoe and kayak, but like the dog that chases squirrels, I wouldn't know what to do once I got there. Lucky for all of us, we have folks like Justin LeClair, who on his day off and with his dad Gary visiting, was willing to help.

We agreed to meet at Ruth's at 10:30am the next day to assess the situation. Ruth was so happy to know we were willing to help!

So the next day, Peter was still on the dredge pipe right behind Ruth's house but across the resaca. By the time we arrived, Ruth had already contacted the zoo so they would be ready for our patient. And what happens when the pelican sees the three new strangers? He slides into the water from the pipe. He starts to paddle around! Ruth had not seen Peter move off his roost for three days!

Unfortunately, this didn't mean Peter didn't have an injured wing, a hook in his feathers, a problem with his webbed feet, etc. Justin decided the best thing to do would be to go catch the American White

Pelican and give him a thorough examination. Time to get the kayak in the water...and prepare to get close and personal with Peter.



As if knowing what we were planning, Peter paddled around the bend of the resaca by the time we had the kayak in the water and Justin and I had settled aboard. We paddled across and down the resaca to get near the pelican. Justin, an expert at this, informed me of his game plan. Paddle to get close and then paddle quickly to get near Peter fast. Peter had an advantage in the water but we had Justin's net. If we could get close, we might have a chance.

Robert Gaitan and Justin LeClair setting off to help Peter-- photo by Ruth Anne

It was a bit funny. As we are paddling to get close, Peter would paddle left, then right, then left and always had one eye on us. I'm sure he didn't know what to make of this weird creature green creature with blue arms and two heads coming at him. We did worry that Peter might swim through the tunnel that would take him to the next branch of the resaca. This might turn into quite a marathon. Lucky for us, Peter turned around. (I know Justin is in much better shape than I, but I don't think he wanted to paddle Peter and myself back to shore!)

Several times we thought we might get to pin Peter to a corner of the resaca, but he would quickly dart the other way. He clearly could paddle without too much effort. Unfortunately, when he tried to take off and fly away, he couldn't. That was a bit of concern and we needed to make sure he was okay. So Peter paddled on and so did we...getting a bit tired and wet as we turned into the wind.

At one point, we had him! He approached the shore that was thick with branches. He couldn't climb up the shore. No he couldn't, but he could easily swerve around the Brazilian pepper branches in the water and make his way around us and back into the resaca. He moved on while we struggled to back paddle from the branch trap.

Back in the open and heading into the wind that picked up as we left the shoreline, Peter made a mistake. With his head turned to keep an eye on us, he lost some of his streamlined profile. We closed the gap until we were right behind him. When he zagged left, we made a hard push forward until Peter was right next to Justin. As he quickly but gently netted the pelican, I worked to slow us down before we shot right past him. At the last minute, as we slowed down, I placed my paddle blade behind Peter to keep him moving forward and to keep him within the net. Justin was able to reach out and secure Peter next to the kayak. We could stop and breathe.



Returning to shore with captured pelican-- photo by Ruth Anne



Justin looked for any obvious fishing line, hooks, and injuries but couldn't see any. Peter looked good for a white pelican. To have a better look, we headed to shore. Justin kept an eye on our passenger and we fought the wind to make it back.

Once we reached the retaining wall of Ruth's home, Justin handed the pelican to Gary. Justin took hold of Peter as Gary helped me up and we hoisted the kayak out of the water. On land, Justin looked at Peter's wings, feathers, beak, eyes, feet, and everywhere he thought an indication of injury might appear.



He noted Peter was strong; if Gary had not been holding the upper mandible, the pelican would have clearly found his strength. Justin noted the bird didn't have any hidden lines or hooks, didn't flinch when he extended his wings and his crochet or bill-tip, was perfectly fine. Peter looked very good for a white pelican.

Justin assesses the health of the Peter the pelican with assistance of his father, Gary, and is declared healthy – photos by Ruth Anne

In the end, Justin and Gary agreed, the best thing to do would be to return Peter back into the resaca. He was moving well, eating well, and clearly doing fine except that he had a problem flying. After a few more photos, I was given the honor of holding Peter's top beak, holding his body gently to my side, and releasing him forward while letting go simultaneously. He landed gracefully, with wings outstretched, and after a parting glance, paddled away.

We packed up, cleaned up a bit, and chatted with Ruth for a while. We let her know to contact us whenever she had a question in the future. I offered to share information about the Texas Master Naturalist program to her, to any group she was a member of, and to her neighbors. We are here to help and if we don't know what to do ourselves, we have an excellent network of experts we are privileged to call friends and colleagues... "this is the way."



Robert releasing Peter-- photo by Ruth Anne



Below: Peter and company-- photo by Ruth Anne



Pelican Crew: Robert Gaitan, Justin and Gary LeClair – photo by Ruth Anne

As another month of my final year as chapter president, goes by, I'll have to say I won't miss the administrative side of running our chapter. I know it has to be done to keep our chapter moving forward but I've had my turn. It is time for someone else. I want to find more pelicans to save and I want to engage with the other "Ruth's" out there.

Our mission is to develop a great network of volunteers but we equally need to be sharing what we know with our community. While outreach is an administrative function, we need to be out reaching the public and helping make an impact. We should all be jumping at the chance to help the Texas Children in Nature Network execute their initiatives. We should be championing the City Nature Challenge to educate the community and to generate critical data for our region. We should push ourselves to introduce the Junior Master Naturalist program in our region. In the absence of anyone else collecting injured animals and getting them to where they need to go, we should be willing to fill in when the need arises.

When I shared my expectations and hopes early on, someone replied that we were a small, podunk chapter. I hope I'm not the only one that rejects that premise. While some may chose to view the world as a pessimist, I refuse to accept the way things were as the best we can achieve. It may take getting wet and sweaty, it may mean taking your family member on your day off on an adventure, and it may mean Peter returning with his friends to glare at the site where he was assaulted, but the result is a satisfaction you can't replace with another slideshow, spreadsheet, or even another article.